

Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation Investment Strategies Committee

Final Meeting Summary

January 12, 2000

(Approved February 9, 2000)

Present: Dale Stedman, Chair, Ted Bottiger, Don Briscoe, Peter Hurley, Bettie Ingham, John Kelly, Patricia Otley

Absent: Bill Lampson, Vice-Chair, Senator Mary Margaret Haugen, Representative Maryann Mitchell, Charles Mott

The Chair called the meeting to order at 8:40 a.m. The Committee reviewed the minutes from the December 8th meeting and approved them as presented.

The Committee meeting times were amended to the following dates:

Wednesday, January 12, 2000	8:30 a.m. – Noon; Full Commission (Olympia)
Wednesday, February 9, 2000	8:30 a.m. – Noon
Thursday, March 9, 2000	8:30 a.m. – Noon
Wednesday, April 12, 2000	8:30 a.m. – Noon
Wednesday, May 10, 2000	8:30 a.m. – Noon
Thursday, May 18, 2000	Full Commission Retreat
Wednesday, June 14, 2000	8:30 a.m. – Noon

The February, March, and April meetings have been scheduled at the SeaTac Holiday Inn across from the SeaTac Airport. Meetings will also tentatively be held on July 12, August 8, October 11, and November 8; these meetings have not yet been confirmed.

[Note: The March meeting has been rescheduled for March 29th at the SeaTac Holiday Inn from 8:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.]

Review of Draft Package Options

Mike Doubleday, consultant to the Commission, prepared a memorandum summarizing the results of the December 8th Committee meeting for the Committee to review. The Committee requested the following revisions to the document:

- Option 2 – State more clearly the problem of having too many dedicated funding “pots.” It is important to distinguish that the flexibility should be within the transportation funds, not that all funding should be flexible.
- Option 4 – Add language about possible conflicts that exist with cost-benefit analysis. Municipalities may be struggling with concurrency under the Growth Management Act, which could prevent them from implementing the most cost-effective project first. The Committee may need to address any additional changes at the state level before cost-benefit analysis can be used more consistently.
- Option 8 – Forcing cities to use pavement management technologies without ensuring the necessary resources for implementation would result in an unfunded mandate. The Committee should also consider eliminating studded tires to provide relief to the roads.

Discussion of Overlapping Issues with the Revenue Committee

After a brief break, the Investment and Revenue Committees reconvened together to discuss issues that both Committees are addressing. The Committees found that they agreed on the general approach to the following issues:

- Linking maintenance and preservation funding to dedicated sources;
- Linking preservation funding to pavement management systems;
- Shifting focus from projects to functions and corridors;
- When are transportation functions appropriately funded by user fees;
- Linking funding to systemwide priorities;
- Uses of local/regional revenue authority; and
- Funding flexibility across modes.

Linking maintenance and preservation funding to dedicated sources. This idea was proposed as a result of local government inability to fully take care of existing, often aging, infrastructure using available revenues. Sometimes it is preferable to allow a roadway to deteriorate completely so that it becomes eligible for grant funds. The public does not understand why government does not take care of the basics. A member asked whether such a proposal goes against the need for increased flexibility in use of funds. On the other hand, the question was raised of what is more important: flexibility or ensuring that basic needs are met. It was suggested that other proposals be linked to this one: the use of least lifecycle costs to determine best timing for repairs and the use of incentives to reward good maintenance of the existing system. Basic maintenance of transit and other modes must be included. Another issue raised was whether there is agreement on the standards to which facilities should be maintained. Should funding be linked to minimum standards or some other level? Should a central authority decide or should it be the local community? Members agreed that secure funding for maintenance and preservation would ensure predictability and long-term accountability. Incentives were favored over dedication.

The Investment Committee felt very strongly about the importance of flexible funding and hesitated to recommend a new “dedicated” source for maintenance and preservation funds. However, both Committees agreed on the importance of a stable source of funds for this very high priority. The Committees resolved this dilemma by agreeing to dedicate funds for a certain level of maintenance and preservation (as determined by a consistent standard) and to allow flexibility for new projects that improve mobility or safety.

Linking preservation funding to pavement management systems. Members felt this proposal should link to the previous discussion. Pavement management systems should not become an unfunded mandate, but rather there should be incentives for their use.

Shifting focus from projects to functions and corridors. Members agreed that emphasis on corridors would strengthen the incentives of adjacent jurisdictions to work together. It was noted that the implication of this proposal included the flexibility to develop solutions across modes. Members felt that corridor-based approaches should add to the system, not represent a net loss of other funds. It was suggested that a “hold harmless” principle be the base of any new proposals.

Linking funding to systemwide priorities. It was observed that regions already develop priorities through their 6-year plans and that funds could be sent to regions as block grants to meet these regional priorities. It was also noted that the need was for improved regional planning and funding, not necessarily for new entities.

When are transportation functions appropriately funded by user fees. Members commented that the term “user fee” means different things. The public supports the idea of user fees when they fund a specific local service or facility. It is not always palatable when it is the gas tax that everyone pays for or when it is a mechanism like “road pricing.” It was noted that any increased use of user fees would need to be incremental, not a sudden, large fee. Another member felt that basic infrastructure up to a certain level should be paid for out of general revenues.

Uses of local/regional revenue authority. Members agreed that local and regional revenue authority is generally a good thing, although it has a downside in that if local voters deny requests to use the authority, it is useless for meeting infrastructure needs.

Funding flexibility across modes. Members agreed that flexibility was a desirable characteristic in funding sources.

Presentation on Puget Sound HOV/Freeway System

Mark Hallenbeck, Director of the Washington State Transportation Center (TRAC) at the University of Washington, discussed potential changes to High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) system performance in Washington. He presented data on lane utilization, which showed that during peak periods in some segments, the HOV lanes have been highly successful in meeting their goal of providing increased throughput of people. The

WSDOT standard for HOV lane performance is traffic flow at 45 m.p.h. 90 percent of the time. During peak periods, HOV and general-purpose lanes carry about the same number of vehicles, but HOV carry about twice as many people. According to his data, even at their weakest, HOV lanes carry the same number of people as general-purpose lanes during the peak traffic hours. However, during off-peak hours, there is room for 400 to 800 additional cars per hour in the HOV lanes. When there is unused capacity, the question is raised whether that capacity could be put to better use. Using the spare capacity, however, does not always bring about improvements and may decrease safety. Bottlenecks and merge points may worsen with higher volumes, for example at the entrance to the SR-520 bridge.

One solution might be to open some but not all off-peak HOV lanes to single-occupant vehicles, either for free or at a price. In the best case, it could reduce congestion and increase travel speeds and reliability. But it could also introduce confusion to the driver and create problems for management and enforcement of the system. Assuming toll collection of \$1 per trip, twice a day, on 7 separate facilities, \$13 million in gross revenues could potentially be generated, but that does not include the cost of implementation and toll collection. The results of his research are published online at the following address: <http://depts.washington.edu/trac/floweval/FlowResults.pdf>.

Rob Fellows, HOV System Planning Manager for the Washington State Department of Transportation's Office of Urban Mobility, discussed ways to use available capacity in the HOV system. He argued that adapting the existing concurrent HOV system for High-Occupant/Toll lanes presents challenges, but providing tolled, barrier-separated express lanes could be beneficial and meet multiple objectives. He explained that the system needs to provide fast, reliable trip times for HOVs. Speed and reliability are best achieved when conflicts with general-purpose traffic are minimized and when users experience continuity and consistency throughout the system (for example, when the lanes are barrier-separated, like the I-5 express lanes). To apply tolls in a way that is credible with the public, the application should be consistent. Either everyone pays, or tolls are charged for very high-cost facilities, or tolls are charged for some added value, such as faster travel time.

In a system such as in the Puget Sound region where most HOV lanes are concurrent (separated just by a stripe) and not barrier-separated, and where the system would be tolled only during certain hours and on certain segments, charging fees would raise a variety of operational issues. There would be the question of where exactly at any given time to impose a toll; no single price would be optimal at all locations, and enforcement would be complicated. Additionally, traffic forecasts indicate that by the year 2020, HOV lanes will be overcrowded and it will be beneficial to switch from 2-person to 3-person carpool requirements for HOV use. Opportunities do exist to consider tolling on the express lanes on I-5 and I-90. HOVs would still travel free, but single-occupant vehicles would pay a toll. Fees could reduce traffic bottlenecks at each end, and revenues could be used to support the system. Additional opportunities may exist for new lanes in corridors such as I-405 or SR-167, and tolls could offset the cost of new construction.

Mike Hoover, staff to the Senate Republican Caucus, presented the results of his research on HOV systems. He explained that there is potential and even public support for opening HOV lanes to all users during off-peak hours. He found that only four states of the 21 that he polled restrict usage of their HOV lanes at all times of day. He suggested that the state should consider developing a set of criteria for opening the system to single-occupant vehicles use.

Chris Endresen, Kitsap County Commissioner and Chair of the Puget Sound Regional Council's HOV Policy Advisory Committee, presented the results of the advisory committee's recent report. The committee worked for 16 months reviewing the 24-hour HOV policy and strongly recommended keeping the policy. The committee's conclusions were based on technical, policy, and common-sense perspectives. Technical issues included increasing congestion on all parts of the system and the need to use capacity most efficiently; spreading peak periods; and the utilization of HOV capacity to carry twice as many people per vehicle as adjacent general-purpose lanes. Other technical issues were enforcement issues, air quality, and the growth of transit and HOV use as part of the region's adopted transportation plans. The policy perspective included such issues as supporting growth management plans, providing reliability for transit operations, and keeping Sound Transit's ballot commitments to deliver future high-capacity transit service. Common-sense issues include supporting employers' efforts to reduce trips and keeping the commitment to preserve our quality of life in the region. Opening the lanes to single-occupant vehicles also could prove confusing and even a safety hazard.

The Committee adjourned at 12:10 p.m.